

A worrying trend: Journalists have become entertainers and scientists have become consultants. Independent research and investigative journalism has been replaced by a general and superficial opinion-market. This dangerous development is threatening democracy, writes Kjell Andersson, PhD, who is calling for a new “independent function in society”.

When journalists fail us

Scientists, politicians and journalists are increasingly allowing their own interests to govern their actions.

The strongest win and the democratic decision-making process is disabled.

The SOM Institute in Gothenburg has recently shown that public faith in researchers has fallen drastically.

The researchers behind this report have linked their results to recent news stories about scandals and fraud in the academic world, but there may be another more long-term cause – the increasing amount of external funding at universities and colleges.

On the 14th May, 2006, the Swedish radio programme Kaliber reported that one in six university professors were having ethical conflicts with their financiers.

A typical quote goes: “You do anything to survive financially. Everything we do is really only done to attract funding. We have become consultants and the universities have become agencies providing consultant services.”

If political scientist Bo Rothstein is right the research in Sweden is also increasingly governed by political interests.

But it's not just the independence of academic research that is under threat. We have recently heard that the Swedish state-owned television service (SVT) is cutting back its news and current affairs programmes. We are to get more entertainment in various forms even on public service.

At the same time as the news is being cut back, the news reports that remain are being delivered in the form of entertainment at the cost of investigative journalism.

On the 8th June Göran Rosenberg wrote in his column in the Swedish quality daily Dagens Nyheter that the news is produced to an ever greater degree not by journalists but by professional communicators working for companies, government authorities or special interest groups.

At first glance, the independence and identity of science and journalism might seem like two unrelated problems. But on a deeper level it's about a general, dangerous condition of today's society.

The societal structures for debate and decision are being dissolved. Instead of a clear division of roles between science, politics and journalism we have a general market for opinion and debate in which scientists, journalists, special interests, companies and politicians act from agendas either expressed or hidden.

The risks and advantages of different energy systems, the management of nuclear waste, GMO foods, genetic testing and the possible risks of mobile telephony are examples of areas containing both complex scientific questions and difficult ethical dimensions.

Those active in the opinion-market are working to win support for their interests and we are not equipped to get an objective analysis.

It is no longer possible to see the values underlying the descriptions of the problems we face, which aspects have been left out, the hidden agendas of individual players or on what grounds political decisions are made.

All this results in lower quality decision-making and a reduction in the citizens' ability to demand accountability. We are losing democratic control over decisions affecting our future society.

If the commercialisation of science and the political involvement continues we will soon have nowhere to turn when we want real knowledge and faith in science will be lost.

And if the media continue developing into an entertainment industry, journalists will lose their vital role as watchdogs over those in power.

Other functions as well risk losing their identities in the opinion-market where roles are dissolved.

How can we create a society with a greater degree of transparency in decision-making? The most readily available solution is for the media to take greater responsibility. But politicians must also reflect on how they can gain greater insight and how to avoid having the issues framed by certain interests.

We need an independent function in society whose sole purpose is that of objective scrutiny and which would act in support of parliament as well as decision-makers on regional and local levels.

Such a function would create arenas where public authorities, industry, environmental groups and other stakeholders could take part without risking manipulation and without feeling they had been taken hostage. Here **all participants** must give explicit answers on factual issues, values and underlying interests.

Proper efforts to gain transparency will provide politicians and the general public with opportunities for insight, participation and a comprehensive perspective. Buzzwords such as openness, transparency and participation could take on real meaning.

Statements made by the academic world should be questioned far more than is currently done and all arguments put forward, also those advanced by environmental groups and special interest groups, should be the subject of organised forms of public examination.

Journalists could play a central role as professional cross-examiners, but they would have to dig deeper than in today's debate programmes – all too often a form of entertainment in which well-known debaters are called in to bandy words for five minutes.

In complex matters of a technical or scientific character journalists need the support of experts with a scientific background.

In such cases it is important that demands for impartiality be satisfied, which means that those experts who are called in have had no prior involvement in the matter.

Such a function cannot, of course, be created easily, but there is no doubt that the need for one exists. In the long run, a new function of this kind must be given a solid theoretical foundation and guidelines for practical realization. Journalists, politicians, political scientists and philosophers will be needed to provide input.

Together we can create a force to counter the glib market for opinion and debate and then science and journalism can recover their rightful places in society.

Kjell Andersson

PhD in theoretical physics and Managing Director of Karita Research

E-mail: kjell.andersson@karita.se